

## Chapter 8

I didn't know when I finally fell asleep.

I woke to Bennett moving urgently around the bedroom.

He was losing his usual composure, struggling into his clothes as if rushing to an emergency.

"What does Sharlene need now?" The words left my mouth before I could stop them.

He froze, staring at me for a long moment. "Maddie..."

Then he asked a strange question. "Maddie, was this your doing?"

I frowned. "Was what my doing?"

He immediately looked away, shaking his head. "Nothing. Lena's dealing with a complicated situation involving me. I have to go."

With that, he hurried out.

Shortly after he left, I noticed a flood of direct messages on my Twitter.

Opening them, I found messages of support and outrage on my behalf.

That was when I discovered Bennett and Sharlene were trending again.

But this time, the comments were brutal.

Someone had uncovered photos from my engagement party alongside the date.

When compared with the day Sharlene posted her photo, the timelines matched

perfectly.

Now, everyone quickly realized Bennett had left our engagement party to be with Sharlene.

The "perfect couple" they had adored for less than a day came crashing down.

Bennett became the cheating villain.

Sharlene became the homewrecker.

The same voices that had celebrated them yesterday were now full of condemnation.

"His fiancée must be devastated. Left at the party while he ran to another woman."

"That's Madeline Brook! The renowned painter!"

"If someone like Madeline can be betrayed, what hope is there for the rest of

us?"

Suddenly, I understood Bennett's strange question.

He thought I had orchestrated the online backlash against Sharlene.

I turned off my phone, a bitter smile touching my lips.

After five years together, his question proved he had never truly understood me.

If he had, he would have understood I had no tolerance for betrayal.

The moment I discovered it, I walked away.

I finished my preparations, collected my passport, and returned home.

Tomorrow was departure day.

That evening, I cooked dinner, thinking I'd share one final meal with Bennett.

But the food grew cold without him returning.

I did see him online, though.

He and Sharlene had posted a clarification video that nobody believed, because the final key player, me, had remained silent.

At 11 PM, Bennett finally called.

He sounded exhausted. "Maddie, you've seen what's happening online?"

"You know Lena and I were innocent. Could you ... post something to clarify things?"

I looked at the plane ticket and passport on my desk. "Alright," I said quietly.

"I'll post something in the morning."

He audibly relaxed. "Thank you for understanding. I can't come back yet, but once this settles, I'll make it up to you.

"I've requested time off for our honeymoon. You wanted to see those exhibitions abroad, right? We'll go together."

I started to speak, but Sharlene called him away.

"Benny, I need you!"

"I have to go," he said abruptly, hanging up.

Staring at the dark screen, I finally whispered the words I hadn't been able to

say.

"I don't need it, Bennett.

"My life has nothing to do with you anymore."

The house stood completely still.

The next morning at 7 AM, I wheeled my suitcase to the entryway.

I wheeled my already-packed suitcase to the entryway, documents and ticket in hand.

There, I laid out the house keys, Bennett's credit card, and a letter on the console table.

For a moment, I just stared blankly at that silver key.

He'd given it to me when I moved in, though the digital lock made it unnecessary.

"Maddie," he'd said solemnly, placing the key in my palm, "from today, you're the lady of this house. You hold the key. Whether you use it is your choice."

Now my choice was to be myself again.

The key had served its purpose.

I walked out without looking back.

By 8 AM, I was at the airport.

Before boarding, I opened Twitter and sent out the clarification I had prepared the night before.

There was no actual sound, of course.

But as the signal was transmitted, I could have sworn I heard a faint whooshing in the air, the finality of that single tap.

"Hello, this is Madeline Brook.

"About all the rumors online these past couple of days, I've gotten tons of DMs from fans and followers. So here's my official statement: Sharlene Morrow never came between Bennett Webster and me. She's not any kind of other woman.

"The truth is, Bennett and I were over the moment he left our engagement party.

"Everything that's happened between him and Sharlene since then has nothing to do with me.

"So here's to Bennett and Sharlene: wishing you both all the best."